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C O N F I D E N T I A L JEDDAH 000145

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RIYADH PLEASE PASS TO DHAHRAN, DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM KISL SA

SUBJECT: JEDDAH MUNICIPAL COUNCIL: NOT WELL-KNOWN AND OF DEBATABLE IMPACT

REF: A. JEDDAH 278 B. JEDDAH 0093

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana C. Gfoeller for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) BEGIN SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Various meetings with Jeddah Municipal Council members and prominent elite have presented a bleak picture concerning Council effectiveness and accomplishments. Over the past two years, the Council has approved and managed Municipality projects while introducing a few of their own (Reftel B); however, many Jeddawis do not feel that the Council does enough to improve city services while others are either unaware of the Council's activities or do not know a Council exists. While recently-elected Council President Dr. Tarek Fadaak (Councilors elected him in December 2007) is considered a "liberal" and has plans to raise the Council's profile, Council members have mixed feelings regarding past successes and the potential for realizing future endeavors.

¶2. (C) Some Jeddah Councilors believe that the Council is still a "toothless organization" (Reftel A) while others claim that it has facilitated greater openness between the city government and residents. Additionally, other issues appear to plague Council operations, including a quarrelsome relationship between the Council and the Office of the Municipality. Despite Council President Fadaak's renewed enthusiasm and Jeddawis' increased willingness to criticize openly city services, the Council may remain a symbol of political stagnation until or unless the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs affords it a clear mandate and the power to implement it. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF JEDDAH COUNCIL: VERY NEGATIVE

¶3. (C) In various conversations with Jeddah elite, most spoke negatively of the Council while some were not aware that it existed. One businessman who participated in the Saudi Entrepreneur Roundtable with President Bush stated of the Jeddah Municipal Council on January 15: "Where shall we place the flower pot: here or there?" In other conversations with local Jeddawis, such as female entrepreneur and long-time Consulate General contact Alia Banaja, some were unaware that a Municipal Council existed. (NOTE: Women were not able to vote in the Municipal Council elections. END NOTE.)

¶4. (C) Jeddah residents bemoan frequently that the city government needs to do more. Residents of the Gholail district in Jeddah with a population of approximately 300,000 told reporters from English-language daily Saudi Gazette on February 2 that the local government is not addressing basic needs such as "sewage clearance" and "street maintenance." Saudi Arabic-language daily Shams published an investigative report in December 2007 on the accomplishments of elected municipal leaders in Jeddah after two years in office.

Residents reported not having seen any positive change in the services provided.

**COUNCILORS' OPINION ON THEIR EFFECTIVENESS: PESSIMISTIC TO GUARDEDLY OPTIMISTIC**

**¶15. (C)** In meetings with several Jeddah Municipal Councilors, most told Pol Chief they agreed with the often-mentioned claim in Saudi English-language dailies that Councilors are not effective because they do not have a clear mandate and their roles are only supervisory. (NOTE: Jeddah Municipal Council resolutions are non-binding and are not made public. END NOTE.) Other members, such as Council President Fadaak and Councilor Bassam Jamel Akhdar, identified additional problems such as not having sufficient time to address constituent concerns. Fadaak told Pol Chief that Councilors should work full-time, "just like Majlis Ashoura members." Finally, many acknowledged to Pol Chief that they are trying to make the best of a difficult situation.

**¶16. (C)** In contrast, appointed Jeddah Municipal Councilor Muhammad Abu Dawood argued that the Council's existence alone was significant. He also stated that some of the appointed Jeddah Municipal Council members were more optimistic now that the Council has a "liberal" President. (NOTE: In a 6-8 vote divided mainly between appointed members and elected members, Tarek Fadaak (appointed) won the Council Presidency over current Vice President Hasan Zahrani (elected) in late December 2007. The Council comprises 7 Saudi government-appointed members - many considered liberal - and 7 elected members - all religious authority-supported Islamists and considered conservative. END NOTE.)

**¶17. (C)** Additionally, Council Vice President Hasan Zahrani believes that the Jeddah Municipal Council has encouraged

Jeddawis to step forward and to complain formally as well as openly about the state of city services. Some evidence exists that the Council has responded to such complaints: it canceled a few Municipality projects in part because Jeddah residents started filing complaints, according to a November 2007 article in the Arabic-language daily Asharq AlAwsat. Council President Fadaak is trying to capitalize on this momentum by encouraging Jeddah residents to bring to the Council their concerns, both through the Council's "Friends of Jeddah" program (Reftel B) as well as through less formal means, such as personal calls from and to residents.

**MUNICIPAL COUNCIL-MUNICIPALITY OFFICE RELATIONS: AMBIGUOUS AND CONTENTIOUS**

**¶18. (C)** An issue that confuses the Jeddawis that are aware of the Council's existence is the difference between the Municipal Council and the Office of the Municipality. When Pol Chief asked President Fadaak and Vice President Zahrani to explain the difference, they looked at each other, paused and stated: "That was a good question," adding with some hesitation: "The Council oversees the Municipality's projects." Former Municipal Council President Rabah Al-Daheri did not clarify any further when stating that the main tasks of the Council were "reporting and monitoring" and setting "a clear agenda for tackling...problems."

**¶19. (C)** Jeddah Municipality officials have a starkly different opinion. Municipality official Samy Nawar, Head of the Departments for Historic Preservation, and Tourism and Culture, informed Pol Chief on January 28 that he did not know "What the heck the Municipal Council does." He said that for years the Municipality has taken care of city services and could continue to do so without the Council. He then relayed an ongoing argument between the Municipality Office and the Council regarding the use of "Bait Al Balad" (an old historical building that currently houses city government offices): the Municipality wants it to be a museum while the Council prefers it remain an office building. While he admitted that he considered the 2005 Council elections a "big deal," he then qualified his remark, stating: "Perhaps it is better that they are all appointed

and corrupt, rather than elected and falsely claiming  
legitimacy."

GFOELLER